

Handshake

by Josiah Liebert

The outfit went beyond bold, to the point that it could only have been chosen by a middle schooler. The bright, yet slightly different shades of orange that the gym shorts, knee high socks, and team t-shirt consisted of would easily turn heads in my direction. The 1.5 foot tall homemade wizard hat completed the unintentional traffic cone costume. Eventually, after a deal of restless squirming, I heard what I was waiting for, “With 4.0 points on the day, taking home 2nd place in 6th grade division...!” With a bounce in my feet, I received my shining white trophy and a firm handshake from The King himself. A true legend in the Portland youth chess community, he comes to many tournaments adorned in his royal leggings, puffy crown, and purple cloak. As is customary, the King and I stood together for a picture, uttering the famous lines “chessy cheese” and “cheesy chess”. Somehow, the old man in leggings had given a preteen wizard, which really looked more similar to a highlighter, his moment to shine. As we faced the cameras together, our connection felt real.

One month later, I find myself in a cozy windowless room, so silent one could hear a pin drop, despite the crowd of middle schoolers seated at five long tables. This is an important moment, the last game of the day. With a win against Ryuu, an old teammate and slick competitor, I could complete my first perfect 5.0 tournament and win first place. He is like a frog, perfectly still, patiently waiting to find his best move, then BAM, in one swift move his knight is moved, clock is hit, signifying the end of his turn. *Check*. My king has to retreat. That slippery knight jumps deeper into my ranks. *Check again*. My king moves to his recently occupied space. I think about our banter from before the game. “If we accept a draw at the beginning of the game, we’d automatically get first and second.” With a move of Ryuu’s knight,

a draw would be forced. A sly smirk formed on his face. He moved the knight, sealing my gambit. Our hands touched for a handshake, cold and clammy, joint winners in this game. An infectious smile grew on his face. As it seeped onto mine, our connection felt real.

Recently, I have taken to playing chess online during virtual school. Instead of a dark sea of initials that lifelessly sit on my computer screen during class, I turn to a wall of monotone pawn avatars. Although I know there are real people behind every avatar, they could just as easily be a computer program to me. Daily, I hear my math teacher beg her students to turn their cameras on and engage in class, arguing, “I don’t even know what you guys look or sound like.” Most days she’s met with the silent, faceless, impenetrable wall. I understand her problem, it wears me down too. For her sake and mine, my face appears next to hers, two people in a silent sea of gray. Still, my phone holds my attention. I search for human connection, but all I find are computers, clocks, and games. Turning back to my computer, I notice the pain on Ms. Bodzin’s face and voice as she begs the class to engage with her. I imagine she struggles, like me, trying to form connection and find what is real.

When I find myself confused differentiating what is real and what is not, I always end up at the same place. For years I have found comfort and solace in Levi and Jesse’s house. Ever since they moved next door as toddlers, we became fast friends and never looked back. Over the years, I’ve grown special relationships with the entire family; their mom, dad, younger brother, and especially, their little sister, Meara. Now, whenever I go over, inevitably the question always arises. “D’you wanna play chess?” she implores, almost stumbling over her own words. Of course I’m happy to oblige. The last game we played was probably our best game yet. After watching me quickly dispatch her older brother, Amos, we shook hands and began. From the start, Meara’s focus was obvious when she completed two consecutive knight moves,

remembering their trick L-shaped movement. The board quickly became cluttered, yet mistakes were seldom. Eventually, at a pivotal point in the game, Meara found a chance to trade queens. As she captured my queen, her face radiated with pride because of the accomplishment. She kept up with me, piece for piece, throughout the game. When a few pieces were scattered across the board, I offered a draw. Gladly she stuck out her small hand and made official our first ever draw. Somehow, my worst result is also my favorite experience. Seeing her grow as a player, from cluelessness to queen trades and draws, our connection feels real.

What is real for me are small moments shared with other people. Something that, when I am old, I will look back and think *only we know the truth behind this situation*. Only the King and I know what it's like to look over the chess kids and their parents, in our funny little outfits, yet the coolest in the room. Only Ryu and I know the feeling that we got, both winning despite our draw. Only Meara and I will understand the amount of time spent learning and the number of losses she faced before that fateful draw. And they all happened through chess. My coach once told me, "Chess can help people overcome boundaries such as age and language." I agree. You can communicate through your posture, facial expression, moves, and handshake. You can't find what is real through chess alone. You need an opponent. Or a collaborator. That's why the most important part of the game happens before you begin and after you end playing. The handshake allows you to remember what's real.